

OCTOBER

Educator Well-Being

Be Well to Teach Well
& Lead Well



REACH

Recognizing. Educating. Adapting. Connecting. Helping.



Be Well to Teach Well & Lead Well

Guidance to Support Educator Well-being

It is a powerful truth that our greatest tool as teachers and educators in combating the negative, lifelong impacts of exposure to adversity in childhood is, put simply, ourselves.

The research is clear that the buffering, supportive, unwavering relationships our students have with adults can protect their brains and bodies from the stress they experience and can help them grow resilient in the face of hardship. As challenging as education can be at times, and as hard as it is to meet the full social and emotional needs of all our students, educators already have what it takes to rise to the challenge. We just need to be able to access it...sustainably.

Educator well-being is a central part of the trauma-informed process. Our efforts in the past several decades to try to manage the growing needs of our students have often left educators with more training modules and paperwork to complete, but less time to connect with students and with each other.

As we continue to develop tools to increase capacity for instruction and classroom management, the question in educators' minds is often, "but how will I find the time or emotional capacity to do this?" When our students come to school with connection deficits, challenging behaviors rooted in the stress they experience inside and outside of school, or complex social needs that can interrupt their readiness to learn, they do so with the expectation that their educators will help them. And every day, across the state of Missouri, educators continue to show up for their students, asking, "how can I help?" Educators are doing everything they can to find the answers. They work long hours doing hard work and heart work, often until the toll on their own well-being becomes too great. As a result, too many teachers leave the profession in their first few years, too many educators are struggling with mental, behavioral, and physical health concerns, and too often schools continue to ask them for more.

The capacity for tremendous healing and growth happens in the context of healthy relationships which begs the question, “who will help the educators?”

The reality is that educator well-being is a collective responsibility, encompassing self-care, community-care, and administrative and organizational supports. We will explore each of these areas in this document with the goal of providing specific strategies in each domain that schools can implement immediately to address the needs of their school community.

Every individual’s path to well-being will be different and there is not a single set of practices or approaches that can meet all those unique needs. Instead, we need to embrace an overflowing toolbox of options and remember that educators who are well are best able to teach and lead well.

Vicarious Trauma & Burnout

Vicarious and secondary trauma are the result of internalizing the traumatic experiences of others. Every day, educators are exposed to the trauma their students experience through the stories that students share and the behaviors they exhibit. One of the most important tools an educator can have is empathy, but when that empathy results in continuously feeling for and with students and colleagues, it can start to take a toll on mental and physical health. When unaddressed for too long, vicarious, and secondary trauma can result in burnout. Burnout is experienced physically, emotionally, and through job performance is often associated with poor self-concept, negative attitudes, and exhaustion. Most educators have at various times witnessed burnout within themselves or their colleagues. The symptoms of burnout vary, but they can include:

- Decreased patience
- Apathy
- Irritability
- Disconnection
- Frequent sick days
- Mistrust
- Rigidity
- Indifference
- Hopelessness
- Short temper
- Under- or over-sleeping
- Under or over-eating
- Forgetfulness
- Egocentrism

Often, the behaviors or attitude of educators experiencing burnout can create damage or distance in relationships with colleagues. As will be discussed later in this document with community care, we must resist this and instead approach burnout in colleagues as an opportunity to support them. If we are not able to address or interrupt burnout, the long-term consequences can be dire and include substance abuse, chronic fatigue, heart conditions, and even early death.





Shifting our Mindset:

Educator Well-being Must be a Priority

In every educational institution, leaders grapple with how to best utilize the time, talent, and resources that they have. It is important to acknowledge that every choice we make about how to use one of those resources is a choice to not use that resource on something else. There are recommendations in this document that might represent additional financial investment from districts, but we are already seeing the high costs educator burnout plays in rising turnover costs. What would happen if we directed resources to supporting and developing teachers, instead of just replacing them?

We must also all shift our mindset that when an educator does experience burnout, it does not represent some individual failing for that educator. Well-being is a collective responsibility and so is burnout. Every school that runs effectively and efficiently knows it does so through effective teamwork and relationships. Those same qualities are what create cultures that help keep educators healthy and effective.

Finally, our mindsets around educator well-being must also reflect an appropriate division of responsibilities when it comes to educator well-being. Educators are ultimately responsible for setting and enforcing boundaries, but their colleagues and leaders are responsible for respecting them. Staff are responsible for utilizing the resources made available to them, but leadership oversees making sure those resources are available and feel safe and accessible. We are all responsible for prioritizing our own self-care practices, but we are also responsible for being active supports and accountability partners to our colleagues.

Well-being is a collective responsibility and so is burnout.

Self-Care

Alive and Well Communities defines self-care as purposeful and intentional actions that help us recharge. This helps us understand what self-care is.

SELF-CARE IS

Something that we have to do on purpose... self-care rarely happens by accident.

Something that actually recharges us. Just doing what we think we should do for self-care, but that we do not actually enjoy or get energy from, is not practicing self-care.

Different from exhaustion. So many educators describe their self-care as some variation of falling onto a soft surface at the end of a long day. While the exhaustion is real in these moments, the self-care is not. It's not on purpose and it often doesn't help us recharge.



SELF-CARE IS NOT

Selfish-or at least a kind of selfish that is harmful to others. In reality, it is healthy to prioritize our well-being and that is what allows us to keep showing up and offering the supportive relationships that students need.

Expensive or time consuming. There are certainly things we do that might fit our definition of self-care that can cost money, but there are more things that do not. If our self-care activities end up creating a new form of stress in the form of financial strain, they do not actually recharge us. Check out the self-care clocks included in this document for lots of ideas of free ways to practice self-care in 30 minutes or less.

Something we force ourselves to do. Look at any list of self-care activities (including the one at the end of this document!) and you may see lots of things that you have no interest in or find downright unpleasant. Give yourself permission to ignore these suggestions. If they do not recharge you, they shouldn't be a part of your self-care plan. Instead, focus on "what works for me? What do I want to do on purpose to care for and recharge myself?"

Because we know that self-care rarely happens on accident, it's important to have a self-care plan. This plan should be something that you can use at home or at school and includes items that you can do in short periods of time you might find during your day. Complete an Alive and Well self-care clock and keep it somewhere you can see to remind yourself to practice self-care at least once a day.

Community Care

Community care is the powerful experience of caring for others in our community that, in turn, creates a caring community for us. At different points during an educator's career, they will need to rely more on their peers and colleagues for support. Community care is about making sure that when we have capacity to give to caring for our educator community, we give it and we build trust in the idea that the collective power of a school or district staff will sustain individual educators through moments of high need. The practices that support community care will and should be unique to each school community.

Ideas for how you and your colleagues can demonstrate community care include:

Create regular, ongoing opportunities to practice well-being together. You can do mindfulness practices at staff meetings, encouraging all staff members to bring ideas for new practices the group can try. Avoid making these group wellness activities only offered after school or during other "unpaid" time. Prioritize making well-being on the agenda, right alongside work around academics and instruction.

Celebrate the good. Often, loudly, publicly.

Challenge and hold each other accountable when unhelpful language is used, including language that suggests "preparing for battle" or "us vs them" narratives between school stakeholders, families, and students. It is emotionally exhausting to feel at war all the time, and the language we use with each other, informally, tells our brain how to feel.

Model practicing self-care or utilizing employee benefits that support well-being. One trauma team at a high school in St. Louis decided to have every staff member try out a different benefit provided in the Employee Assistance Program. After they tried it out, they then talked to their colleagues about their experience and promoted higher utilization of the services.

Create strategies to proactively check in with staff involved in high stress situations. When you know your colleague has had a hard day, or there is a difficult experience they have with a student or family, readily offer support. Be specific and helpful-do not stop at, "I'm here if you need me."

Implement systems to enable specific ways for staff to demonstrate community care. Have every staff member at your school complete a card or public form with three things that bring them joy when they are having a hard time. Make everyone's answers available so that when you identify a colleague in need, you have a head start in knowing specifically how to support them.



Utilize humor! Whether it is starting each day or staff meeting with a joke or finding time for staff to engage in activities that are purely about fun, humor and joy are crucial elements of combating burnout.

Normalize asking for help and disclosing when things are hard. Create a culture where failure is viewed as positive and vulnerability in sharing it is a part of how people support each other.

On hard days, it is often easier to see the things we cannot control than the things we can. Community care is truly the shared responsibility of us all, and even in hard times, we can find things to do that help create the kind of supportive community in which we want to work.



Leadership & Organizational Supports

The importance of self- and community-care is immense, but they alone cannot truly support sustainable educator well-being. The active support from leadership and educational organizations is vital. Using the principles of trauma-informed care, we will explore what trauma-informed organizational and leadership responses to educator well-being encompasses.

Choice:

Maximize choice, addressing how privilege, power, and historic relationships impact both perceptions about and ability to act upon choice.

Principle in Action:

- Creative opportunities for staff members to have agency. As schools navigate the challenges created by COVID-19, it is especially important to identify and communicate clearly where educators have choice.
- Listen to staff members about their sources of stress and honor what they say will help. Free yoga sessions will not alleviate the stress of teachers worried because they do not have adequate materials to execute their lesson plans. A ten-minute walk outside will not fix everything for a teacher feeling like they do not have the tools they need to manage their classroom. Offer supportive choices that make sense, and do not oversell the impact of any single well-being practice as the solution to burnout.

Collaboration:

Honor transparency and self-determination. Seek to minimize the impact of inherent power differentials while maximizing collaboration and sharing responsibility for making meaningful decisions.

Principle in Action:

- Challenge yourself to share power in decision-making even when it feels risky. Create opportunities to work, learn, and fail together. Own challenges together, but also own successes together.
- Find your staff members who excel in self-care, community-care, or well-being and lift them up. Resist giving them more jobs to do, but make changes in their expectations or workload that allow them to be effective supports and teachers to their colleagues.

Safety:

Ensure physical and emotional safety, recognizing and responding to how racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or gender identity may impact safety through the lifespan.

Principle in Action:

- Acknowledge and address staff concerns about physical and emotional safety. Whether we believe another's fears to be warranted or not isn't ultimately important. We must work to create a sense of safety that everyone feels.
- Invest in high quality benefits for behavioral health through both insurance and Employee Assistance Programs. Advertise and refer to these resources relentlessly, highlighting anonymity. Offer incentive programs for staff partaking in activities that support emotional and mental well-being
- Use a tool like the self-care clock to support every staff member in having a self-care plan they can utilize while at work. Normalize that it's an appropriate use of a plan period, lunch time, etc. to engage in a 15 minute well-being practice.

Trustworthiness:

Foster genuine relationships and practices that build trust, making tasks clear, maintaining appropriate boundaries and creating norms for interaction that promote reconciliation and healing. Understand and respond to ways in which explicit and implicit power can affect the development of trusting relationships. This includes acknowledging and mitigating internal biases and recognizing the historic power of majority populations.

Principle in Action:

- Practice transparency. The constant feeling of being left out of information or decision making can be very emotionally taxing.
- Approach front line staff with the belief that it is the role of building and district leaders to earn trust and be worthy of it. Proactively address the power dynamics that exist within decision making, and work collaboratively to find solutions.
- Create standards of practice to assess and plan for employee well-being within supervisory relationships. Equip supervisors with tools to use in these conversations and commit to making this equally important to other metrics in evaluating staff performance.

Empowerment:

Encourage self-efficacy, identifying strengths and building skills which leads to individual pathways for healing while recognizing and responding to the impact of historical trauma and oppression.

Principle in Action:

- Encourage and celebrate when staff set boundaries around their health and well-being. As leaders, vocalize when you may need a break or support and demonstrate that vulnerability is an important community value.
- Avoid practices that send unhealthy and unsustainable messages about work/life balance. Avoid praising staff for engaging in unpaid labor. It is OK to celebrate staff who do an excellent job at living out your educational mission, but it is unsustainable to hold success as something that is only achievable when an educator works for free or burns themselves out. Acknowledge that this is difficult and there is only so much you can and cannot control.

Equity:

A state of being in which an individual's outcomes are no longer predictable by race or another demographic factor. The process of giving individuals what they need, not just what's "equal."

Principle in Action:

- Proactively and openly address the role that racism and bias may play in creating a traumatizing work environment for staff. When engaging in shared anti-racism and anti-bias work, consider the emotional impacts of doing so for staff of color or staff with marginalized identities. Do not wait for them to share their concerns or discomfort to act in supporting their well-being.
- Utilize the Equity Framework from Forward through Ferguson in assessing your efforts to improve educator well-being. Ask yourself:
 - Whom does this benefit?
 - Does this differentially impact racial and ethnic groups?
 - What is missing that will decrease or eliminate racial disparities?

Supporting educator well-being is central to the success of any school's trauma-informed journey. If you want to learn more about what you can do to support your school's trauma-informed work, visit motraumaschools.com or awcommunities.org.



Finding the Time for Self-Care

For more information, go to www.awcommunities.org



TWO MINUTES
TO SPARE

TELL A JOKE LOOK AT A PHOTO OF A LOVED ONE GIVE SOMEONE A COMPLIMENT
TAKE A FEW DEEP BREATHS DOODLE HAVE A CUP OF TEA SPEND TIME WITH YOUR PET
LOOK OUT THE WINDOW HAVE A DAYDREAM DO SOME STRETCHES



FIVE MINUTES
TO SPARE

PLAY A GAME READ YOUR FAVORITE POEM OR QUOTE TAKE A BREAK OUTSIDE
SING ALOUD CHAT WITH A CO-WORKER MASSAGE YOUR HEAD OR HANDS
CHECK IN WITH FAMILY OR FRIENDS RUN IN PLACE HAVE A HEALTHY SNACK



TEN MINUTES
TO SPARE

WRITE IN A JOURNAL TIDY YOUR WORKSPACE READ SOMETHING FOR PLEASURE
TALK WITH SOMEONE ABOUT A PROBLEM TAKE A BRISK WALK DRAW A PICTURE
DANCE IT OUT WATCH A SUNRISE OR SUNSET TAKE SOME ALONE TIME IN A QUIET SPOT



THIRTY MINUTES
TO SPARE

GET A MASSAGE WRITE OUT YOUR GOALS EAT LUNCH WITH A CO-WORKER
COOK A MEAL FROM SCRATCH WRITE A POSITIVE EMAIL TO SOMEONE EXPLORE A PARK
TAKE A BUBBLE BATH LISTEN TO AN ALBUM PRACTICE YOGA OR MINDFULNESS
READ AN INSPIRING STORY DISCUSS SELF-CARE WITH A COLLEAGUE



